The Fourth Church Pulpit

COME TO THE PARTY

October 10, 1993

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7, Matthew 22:1-10

". . .Let us eat and celebrate." Luke 15:23 (NRSV)

A poem relevant to the occasion. . ., with apologies to Ernest Lawrence Thayer:

> "Oh! somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
> The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light:
> and somewhere men are laughing from sunset until dawn,
> But there is no joy in Chicago — for Michael Jordan is gone."
> [Ernest Lawrence Thayer, "Casey at the Bat"]

How was I to know, last summer, when I planned a series of sermons on the parable of the prodigal son, to conclude with the celebration, the party?. . . How was I to know that my sermon on "joy" would come four days after Michael Jordan retired?

Mike Rokyo was right, I think, when he wrote, the morning after that,

> "Michael Jordan's performance was one of the few things from which
> we derived pure joy."

The mood this morning (after Michael) is perhaps more accurately reflected in my favorite prodigal son story. A Sunday school teacher with the help of all the teaching aids at her disposal had told her bright first graders the story of the father and the two sons: how the young son took all his money, ran away, lost it all loing bad things; how he came home and how his father not only welcomed him back but put a robe and ring and new sandals on him, and then killed the fatted calf and threw a wonderful party. She told how the older brother was sulking and wouldn't come to the party and how the father went out to him too. And then she said,

> "Children, at the end of the story there's a wonderful party with singing and dancing
> and lots of food. Everyone is very happy that the prodigal son came home: all but
> one character in the story. Who might that be?" A little boy shot his hand up.
> "Billy?" "Why the saddest one in that story must have been the fatted calf."

This is a sermon about joy — celebration. It's premise is simple. One of the marks of God's people, one of the experiences of the faith of God's people, in all ages, in all circumstances, in all seasons, is joy.

The lesson was another parable Jesus told: about a great banquet, a lavish celebratory meal. Throughout the Bible the sacred meal or celebration is a powerful symbol of human salvation, God's presence, and the joy of living in intimacy with God and one's neighbors.

Think of how often the image occurs.

> "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; . . .
> my cup runneth over." [Psalm 23:5]

> ". . . the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of
> well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."
> [Isaiah 25:6]

The theme of celebration — joy — rejoicing — is prominent in the three wonderful stories in Luke 15, the lost sheep, lost coin, lost son.

The shepherd searches for one lost sheep, finds it, brings it home and calls his neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me."

The woman searches for one lost coin, finds it, calls her neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me."

And of course the father in the parable of the prodigal, when his wayward son returns, having lost all his money and having been reduced to homeless poverty and starts to recite his well-rehearsed but pathetic confession, "Father, I don't deserve to be called your son, make me a hired hand," he can't even get it all out because his father is embracing him, kissing him and instead of listening to the confession is already issuing orders for the celebration. Henri Nouwen says his joy, quite simply, takes over. There is spontaneity. . . extravagance.

> "Quickly, bring out a robe, the best one. . . put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate: for this son of mine was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found."

The son had tried to distance himself from the love of his parents. But it was that very love that saved his life when he came to himself and remembered who he was and whose he was. And it was that very love that had overwhelmed him by accepting, forgiving and reconciling him unconditionally. And then joy takes over — the joy of his parents. Their son is home. The joy of the community, and his, for surely as he sat in their midst, eating and drinking, home — perhaps for the first time, he must have wept the tears of profound, grateful joy.

Joy is the mark of God's people from the beginning to the end of the Bible which concludes with the marriage feast of the lamb. When the elders of Israel are establishing a covenant, they sit down at table and celebrate by eating and drinking.

When Jesus wants to say farwell to his friends, they eat and drink together at the Last Supper and he says:

> "These things I have said to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

At his birth angels announce a great joy. . .

And when, after his crucifixion, he appears to his frightened and confused friends, Luke says:

> "While in their joy they were disbelieving". . . until Jesus gives them fish to eat.

And St. Paul, to the early church in Philippi, a tiny, pathetically weak group of persecuted Christians:

> "Rejoice in the Lord, always — Again, I say, rejoice."

And yet, religion itself, particularly the institutional manifestations, is not ordinarily associated with joy. In fact, the reverse seems more accurate. Who hasn't witnessed something like this? A small child, sitting beside her mother in the pew is smiling brightly, turning to people on all sides, making eye contact and smiling. Her mother places a hand on her shoulder, gives it a meaningful squeeze and says: "Stop that; you're in church." The child slumps back, disappointed, chastened, unhappy. The mother says: "That's better."

Gordon Cosby, founder and pastor of the Church of our Savior in Washington, tells about preaching at a Lenten mid-week evening service somewhere in New England. The worship was particularly dull and uninspiring. Nobody sang the hymns; nobody smiled or reacted. The only thing that moved, he said, were the offering plates. Afterward he and his wife were down, depressed. The church had reserved them a room in a roadside inn, above a tavern. And they couldn't help compare the sounds of laughter, music and camaraderie beneath with the grim lifeless exercise in religion they had experienced. He said,

> "I realized that there was more warmth and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice he would probably have come to the tavern rather than to the church we visited."
> [See Ernest Campbell, *Locked In A Room With Open Doors*, p. 159]

Novelist Eudora Welty uses "Presbyterian" as a synonym for grim, long-faced piety. And a campus pastor friend of mine used to threaten to stand up in church on Sunday and shout, "What's the matter? Somebody die in here?"

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest who has written a fine book, *The Retun of The Prodigal Son*, which identifies what he calls his own resistance to living a joyful life. Did you notice in Jesus' parable of the great banquet, the first people invited refuse to come to the celebration. The king has to force the issue: has to send his servants out onto the highway and invite anyone who happens along to the party. The ones who are supposed to be there are resistant to joy, apparently. Nouwen says, and I think he's right, that somewhere along the way we become accustomed to and learn to accommodate bad news; that we are not used to rejoicing.

> "Somehow," he says, "I have become accustomed to living with sadness and so have lost the eyes to see the joy."

It is no secret that if you look out at the world through the window of television and printed news only, it will be a view dominated by sadness: crime and violence. I am not proposing that the media become Pollyannish and only report nice events. The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun Times* are doing a good and prophetic job of insisting that we not forget or ignore or fail to look at what is happening to our children. In fact, it is only the newspapers' stubborn insistence — "Killing our children" is the name of the *Tribune* series — that we count the murders and know the names and read about their families, that we have not already forgotten the war that is being waged in our city and the epidemic of lethal weapons which keeps claiming the .ves of innocent children. So, no — I do not advocate good news media. But when television begins to tantalize me at seven o'clock with suggestive tidbits about murder, rape and arson at ten o'clock, I have the sense that human tragedy is now being marketed for its entertainment value and that bad news, graphically reported, is what we really want to see.

There is a lot to grieve. Civilization creates an abundance of tragedy every day. Precious young American lives were lost in Somalia last week. But it is not Pollyannish to try to remember that in addition to disaster in Mogadishu, there are 1,000,000 Somalies alive today because American troops are still enabling relief supplies to be distributed. And it is not Pollyannish to recall that in addition to AIDS, starvation and civil war, there are places in Africa where hospitals take care of sick people, where children are fed, where life has promise. And it is not Pollyannish to try to remember that there are, in addition to gangs, drugs and guns, mothers and fathers in Cabrini-Green, working hard, caring for and loving their children.

The real enemy of joy is cynicism: the intellectual abandonment of hope. . . the surrender spiritually to hopelessness:

> "The cultural cynicism," Nouwen says, "that calls trust — naive, and care — romantic, and forgiveness — sentimentalism; the cynicism that sneers at enthusiasm and ridicules spiritual fervor and considers itself realistic." [see p. 109]

Within the past decade or so the church suddenly became aware of the deficit of joy in its own life and the life of the world. And so we started celebrating everything and forcing a kind of cheerfulness on every church ?vent that didn't always ring true. In worship we tried replacing the pipe organ with guitars, moved the pews out and sat people in a circle, threw out the old hymns and got people on their feet clapping. Joy was not always the result. For some of us the result isn't anything authentic except novelty and awkwardness. In fact when someone insists on telling me not only how to feel, but how to express how I feel, what I really feel is manipulated.

Joy — profound, honest joy — is not the result of rearranging church furniture, or the liturgy. It is not produced by rigorously enforced cheerfulness. The joy I'm talking about comes from a theological rearrangement, from a confrontation with goodness so profound it leaves us speechless from, that is to say, a conversion.

Joy seems to be in us. We are quite capable of experiencing joy from the beginning, as anyone who has coaxed a smile out of a six-month-old baby, or watched a five-year-old on a swing knows.

In a special feature on children and spirituality, *Psychology Today* reported a few years ago that until the age of four to six children associate God with play and laughter and fun.

One of the remarkable things about the three parables — lost sheep, lost coin, lost son — is the joy of the one who does the finding. God, these parables seem to be teaching, experiences joy. And it was that thought that C. S. Lewis had in mind in the *Screwtape Letters.* A senior devil is addressing his nephew on the topic. He writes:

> "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the enemy's ground. Pleasure is God's invention, not ours." [p. 49]

Later, Screwtape is discussing the phenomenon of human happiness.

> "I divide the causes of human laughter into joy, fun, the Joke Proper, and Flippancy. You will see (joy) among friends and lovers reunited on the eve of a holiday. What the real cause is we do not know. Something like it (joy) is expressed in the detestable act which humans call music and something like it occurs in heaven. . . Laughter of this kind does no good and should always be discouraged. Besides, the phenomenon is of itself disgusting and a direct insult to the realism, dignity and austerity of hell." [p. 57/58]

And now we know that joy is good for us. The late Norman Cousins, battling disease and pain and depression, discovered the therapeutic value of laughter and reported it in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and a fine book, *The Anatomy of an Illness.* Laughter reduces pain.

So it's all there. We are created for joy, capable of joy from our birth and all our lives. Joy is good for us. Why then, aren't we more joyful?

Surely, part of the reason is the simple abundance of tragedy and sadness. How, after all, can you allow yourself a little joy when things are so hard — murder and mayhem and starvation?

It was precisely the point Jesus was making. God rejoices, as the shepherd, the woman, the father in the stories rejoiced, not because all is well, tragedy eliminated, sadness banished, not because all the non-believers are converts — but because one lost child is found.

The joy of God does not depend on getting all the problems solved, all the tragedy eliminated. It's exactly the opposite. God's joy happens when in the middle of tragedy a child is reclaimed, a lost sheep found.

You and I are invited to joy, not because poverty is eliminated and all the children are well fed and safe and secure, but precisely because in the midst of appalling tragedy and suffering, there is sometimes a child who is loved and nurtured and will make it.

Joy, not because our city's shameful education dilemma is resolved, but that in spite of the unwillingness of adults to be responsible, in spite of taxpayers refusal to pay for their education, there are thousands of Chicago teenagers who simply want their education.

Joy that Tutoring started and all the children showed up.

Joy, not because crime is gone, but because a few individuals care enough to visit prisoners in the county jail every week.

God's people, of all people, can recognize light in darkness, goodness in the midst of evil, healing in the middle of sickness, reconciliation in the midst of personal division and alienation, life in the midst of death.

God's people are people of joy because the news is fundamentally, unequivocally and powerfully good.

There is a God who made the world.

God loves the world.

God, beyond any reasonable hope or expectation, loves us and will not cease loving us.

God loves us so much a precious son was given and he was the one who lived, died, expressing that love.

God loves us so much that we are free — liberated — set free from fear and dread and anxiety; free, that is to say, from the power of death: free to live fully, passionately, giving our lives to people and causes and hope and dreams that matter to us.

The church is the custodian of that goodness. The church, which is not the building, but you and me, while we are together in this building, but also while we are not together, while we are doing the things we do: making deals, arguing cases, treating patients, typing reports, going to meetings, teaching students, caring for children, we — the church of Jesus Christ — are the custodians of joy. I like to think it is our special assignment; not to deny the sadness, or to neglect the struggle for justice or to forget the hard work of being responsible for life. We are to do that too — God's work. We are to bear the world's burdens, feel the world's pain: we are to be angry at injustice . . . and we are to weep when children die. But our special assignment is to remind the world that there is a God who rejoices over every child who comes home, that the news is good.

We seem to get it at Christmas time. We sing it with seasonal ardor, once a year. But it really is for all seasons.

The invitation is to let go of sadness; to see with the eyes of love and joy the gifts God has given; and to join voices in celebration. . .

"Joy to the world,
the Lord is come, . . .

Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy . . ."